



Dealing Effectively with the Media

Do you shy away from speaking to the media? Sure, it can be a scary thing to do, but careful communication with the press can be an effective way to increase public support for issues that matter to us. I recently jumped in with both feet. Although I made most of the classic rookie mistakes, I survived and my issue made the front page. Here I offer some lessons based on that experience.

The Issues: Gender Bias and Beyond

In May 2010 the Canadian government announced the appointment of 19 men and zero women to the prestigious Canadian Excellence in Research Chairs (CERC), valued at C\$10 million each. It took little effort to discover why these plums all went to men. There were several contributing factors, but most egregious was the fact that 36 independent search committees conducted searches primarily by informal networking. The result was that there were 36 male nominees, from which 19 males were selected. We know nothing about the composition of these 36 committees. Anyone up for a wager?

In my outrage at the lack of transparency in the process and extreme gender bias in the outcome, I dashed off emails hither and yon, including one to a friend in the newspaper business. The next morning I received a call from a reporter at the *Vancouver Sun*. She had done her homework, was intelligent and engaging, and seemed supportive of my point of view. In short, she was very effective at getting me to speak freely and openly. Beyond the gender bias issue, the CERC program is riddled with problems. In my view, the whole thing is a misguided effort driven to satisfy political egos and not Canadian science. During one 45-minute phone call I tried to convey my dismay about all of the program's facets.

Keep It Simple

I was thrilled to see the story appear on the front page. However, although some of my quotes were on the mark, other statements were out of context and one was simply wrong.

My first lesson: I realized that if I'd kept my message simpler and restricted myself to one issue, misquotes would have been less likely. And although reporters don't like you to see a piece before it goes to press, before agreeing to do an interview you may negotiate the right to check the quotations (promising instant turnaround) before the final piece is filed. This is especially important if you will be discussing complex issues.

If You Say It, They Will Use It

My second lesson: It is important to remember that you are speaking to a reporter. A good reporter will quickly have you feeling like old pals. Watch your language. The media love inflammatory language, such

as "ego-stroking." (Yup, I said that.) If you say it, they will use it, and it may not appear in the context that you intended.

This is particularly important when being interviewed on the topic of gender bias. As tired as it is to most of us, the "battle of the sexes" still sells. Try not to feed that monster. (Yeah, I fed it.) Doing so unnecessarily polarizes the issue and puts a smokescreen in front of the important question of why, after all of these years, we still live in a society where gender bias exists.

If you get questions that you are not prepared to answer, don't answer them. If you think any of these questions is important, say so, and suggest that you can get back to the reporter on that one or guide them to a source. If you are unsure about something and you offer it on the spot, too late, you've said it. Although I avoided this mistake, someone else interviewed for the same piece offered up a number that was off the mark. He was publicly admonished in a letter to the editor several days later. (Ouch.)

Follow Up

You can always follow up. After you are quoted in a piece, write a letter to the editor or write an opinion piece. Use the opportunity to make your point in a situation where you can carefully consider every word, every turn of phrase. My



Lynne Quarmby

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opinion piece was published four days after my interview and gave me the opportunity to provide a more thoughtful rendering of the issue, sans the dumb remarks. It is quite satisfying to recognize that you are doing something that could make a real difference.

With respect to the recent CERC appointments, the outcome unambiguously reveals the bias that occurs when there is a lack of transparency and when informal networking replaces effective outreach to the community at large. The problem in Canada is systemic. We are stuck in a system that

favors more of the same and does not embrace diversity. While I and others are making some noise, it isn't nearly enough. Voices from the international community would be potent assets.

And with respect to making effective use of the media, I have learned some valuable lessons that can be applied not only to raising public awareness of issues such as gender bias, but also to promoting public understanding of and appreciation for science. ■

—Lynne Quarmby for the Women in Cell Biology Committee

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MEMBERS in the News



Mina Bissell of the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory, an ASCB member since 1973 and 1996–97 ASCB President, was named the winner of the 2010 American Italian Cancer Foundation Prize for Scientific Excellence in Medicine.



Lila Gierasch of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, an ASCB member since 1993, was granted Genentech's Dorothy Crowfoot Hodgkin Award, for her application of biophysical methods to interrogate biological systems.



Shinya Inoué of the Marine Biological Laboratory, an ASCB member since 1967, has been honored by the Government of Japan with the Order of the Sacred Treasure, Gold Rays with Neck Ribbon award. The award recognizes his "contributions to science and the development of technologies, and the promotion of research cooperation between Japan and the United States."